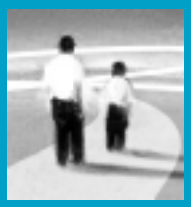
Making Connections and Identifying Partners

"The thought of my son following in my footsteps makes me try harder. I have to love and care for my son in every way possible."



The Issue

Programs that address the issue of low-income fathers are beginning to emerge in many communities across most states. These services usually are offered through local or community- based programs. Most offer some assistance in the form of basic employment services like referrals to job boards, or more intensive services like training, job coaching, peer support, parenting skills and mediation. These programs tend not to be a part of state institutions—the courts or welfare and child support systems—although their clients usually have barriers or challenges associated with these institutions. Some fatherhood programs have fostered formal relationships with the state office of child support or the court system. However, most have not, which reduces the likelihood that they are able to address the complicated issues associated with child support orders or visitation agreements.

> Collaboration is defined in *Webster's Dictionary* as the ability to work together and to cooperate treasonably, as with an enemy.

Although community programs are successful at helping fathers get jobs and providing peer support, state agency efforts to locate these same fathers and enforce child support payments are largely unsuccessful. State agencies and programs that serve fathers often are unaware of each other, and collaboration between programs and agencies is an occasional or rare occurrence. Unlike welfare services for mothers, there is no single access point where fathers can go for help. Consequently, there is no comprehensive or strategic approach to service delivery at the local, county or state level. At the local level, many programs provide similar services to the same population and often are competing with one another for participants and financial resources. If states are to move forward in providing fathers with a network of resources to enable them to support their families, then policymakers, program practitioners, state agency officials, judges and district attorneys all must come together to develop a clear vision and a productive strategy to ensure that children have access to both their parents.

Meeting the Challenge—Policy Options for States

Service delivery becomes fragmented if there is no clear vision for serving fathers or a statewide strategy that is targeted at low-income dads. Programs and agencies differ in their goals and perceptions about fathers.

Local fatherhood programs try to help fathers find jobs or pursue personal development and may view state agencies as part of the barriers to their client's success. Child support agencies view mothers and children as their clients and fathers as the means to provide support, without regard to whether they have the resources to fill this role. Judicial systems deliver punishment as a way to enforce obligations.

Although many programs are designed to work with fathers, only a handful have fostered collaborative relationships with all the relevant partners—child support agencies and the courts. Without the involvement of the courts and child support agencies, these programs are not as successful in bargaining modifications, arrearage reductions and payment plans. By forming partnerships, programs can deal with all aspects of a father's situation—employment, answering to arrearages, establishing payment plans, modifying support, and helping fathers learn life skills or parenting. In addition, child support agencies and the courts can monitor the father's situation from beginning to end.

There are trade-offs to operating work programs that involve partnerships between child support agencies, the courts and community organizations. The greatest advantage is that the courts and child support enforcement agency are working together to create reasonable options for low-income fathers.

Fostering successful partnerships often is the biggest challenge. Child support agencies, community organizations and the courts usually have competing goals and assumptions about the populations they serve and to whom they are accountable. Differing goals can affect

Policy Considerations

- Direct state agencies to develop partnerships to deliver employment or family-based services in exchange for enhanced child support enforcement.
- Develop outcome-based performance measures to assist state agencies to develop comprehensive fatherhood services.
- Use independent boards or commissions to oversee fatherhood projects.
- Use the budget process to direct money for fatherhood programs administered by an independent board that will solicit proposals from service delivery entities.
- Develop intra-agency advisory boards to review state policies across agencies.
- Convene dual case management strategies that allow caseworkers across agencies and organizations to develop joint plans for dealing with clients.

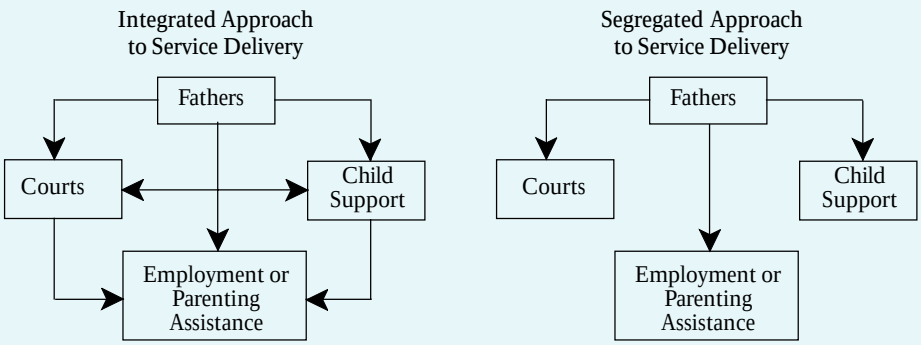
whether entities actually can work toward a common interest. Community organizations may be reluctant to forge partnerships with the courts or child support enforcement agencies for fear that clients may view the program as an extension of their authority. As such, programs must work to overcome these assumptions to provide services to fathers who may benefit, while at the same time demonstrating to the courts and agencies that they are willing to help their clients "play by the rules." Alternatively, courts and child support agencies may be reluctant to embrace partnerships if they are skeptical that their goals will be realized. Opening lines of communication, overcoming faulty assumptions and building a workable framework are, perhaps, more difficult than the actual service delivery that agencies and organizations provide.

Child support agencies focus on locating parents to collect money from them. They provide services to mothers and children, and they are accountable to taxpayers. The courts uphold punitive enforcement measures on behalf of mothers and children. The challenge is to create an environment that is non-threatening for the father, while maintaining the goal of collecting child support. If fathers feel caseworkers are working on their behalf, they are more likely to comply with program requirements, especially if they are given access to other types of services like substance abuse treatment, child development and planned parenting education, and peer support. A father who feels the state's only interest is punishment or collecting from his paycheck is much more likely to revert to underground tactics as a way to support his family.

"Developing that initial trust factor is one of our biggest challenges because local providers view us as the enemy and mistakenly think we are out to get fathers. Once we can convince them that we are working toward the same goal, we can move forward. After all, it is in the child support agency's best interest to help fathers make the most of themselves," says Joseph Mason, director of community outreach for the Department of Public Aid in Illinois.

Two basic service delivery practices are in place (see figure 1). The first is an integrated approach—based on a partnership between the courts, child support enforcement agencies and community-based programs—that delivers an array of employment services, parenting education or mediation. The second approach involves only the community-based program operating independently of state child support agencies or the courts.

Figure 1. Approaches to Service Delivery



Source: NCSL, 1999.

The Parents' Fair Share (PFS) demonstration project was one of the first to test the theory of combining public and private service delivery tactics to mobilize low-income fathers. PFS operated in one county in each of seven states. Program sites were expected to collaborate between child support enforcement agencies and the local providers that administered actual services to fathers. Funding for the demonstration project combined both federal and private foundation funds. The most successful sites in PFS built working relationships with local providers, with the child support system playing the lead. In the demonstration sites where the child support agency had the lead, activities and case management were easier to monitor because both child support enforcement staff and PFS staff were able to administer a team approach to solving problems. Agencies were quick to respond to a downward or upward modification based on frequent updates from local providers. Because both partners were involved from the start, fathers received a clear, unified message about the willingness of both partners to assist in their situation. Regular meetings were convened to allow child support enforcement and PFS workers to talk about appropriate follow-up. According to evaluators, "As enrollees interacted with PFS staff over time, the image that the staff were working closely with and were perhaps even part of the child support agency probably increased the staff's effectiveness in getting participants to pay child support. In sites where these partnerships were not formed, workers and agencies tended to revert to their respective corners and return to business as usual."

As discussed earlier, child support agencies and local organizations often differ in their goals, objectives and assumptions about serving low-income fathers. For fatherhood programs to work, both entities must agree to support a joint mission and reach a common understanding of how their respective offices will work with fathers and with each other.

Building on these lessons, the National Center for Strategic Non-Profit Planning and Community Leadership (NPCL) initiated a 10-city demonstra-

tion project called Partners for Fragile Families (PFF). Like Parents' Fair Share, PFF is a partnership between community-based organizations and federal and state child support agencies. The project emphasizes teaching parental accountability, the role of a father and his influence, effective discipline, handling the daily needs of children, and negotiating the child support enforcement system. PFF sites also will focus on wage advancement for low-income fathers.

"These demonstration projects will test innovative new strategies to help low-income, unmarried mothers and fathers work together for their child's good," said Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala. "We hope these child support agencies and family support organizations will learn new ways to work together, so that children receive the regular financial and emotional support they need and deserve."

Policymakers can help facilitate collaboration by developing outcome-based performance measures that direct agencies and departments toward certain goals. Using the budget process to place conditions on the receipt of funds for special projects also is a viable solution. In addition, developing independent boards or commissions that oversee policy development or monitor implementation can help legislatures maintain oversight capacity.

Illinois developed a Division of Community Outreach that identifies local service providers that work with the child support agency to connect fathers with services. The division conducts informational outreach to providers to better educate them about child support procedures and also provides a liaison that allows providers easy access to information about child support.

> "This demonstration represents another critical step forward in smart, common-sense family policy as we confront the challenges presented by the unfinished business of welfare reform. In the future, low-income mothers *and* fathers must work to contribute to the legal, emotional and financial well being of their children. The men we call 'dead-broke dads' are often willing, but require similar services to welfare mothers if they are to actually become self-sufficient, better parents and able to pay child support."
>
> *—Dr. Jeff Johnson, President, National Center for Strategic Non-Profit Planning and Community Leaderships*

In Marion County, Indiana, the prosecutor's office developed a collaboration between the court system and child support enforcement agency to refer fathers to services and enhanced child support enforcement as an alternative to jail for fathers who are behind in child support.

Los Angeles County, California, conducts weekly case conferences that include caseworkers from the district attorney's office, the child support enforcement agency, the welfare department and local job-training agencies to develop joint plans for dealing with fathers who are participating in their noncustodial parent demonstration project. The weekly meetings allow workers to stay informed about a client's progress or to address critical issues that may be preventing progress. These conferences mandate a joint mission with a specific course of action for participants in the program.

Ohio developed an oversight board that will review county proposals for fatherhood initiatives. Colorado, Iowa and North Carolina are developing boards that will examine fatherhood from a cross-jurisdictional perspective to identify a strategic and inclusive service delivery mechanism for low-income fathers. Connecticut developed a similar board charged with conducting a comprehensive review of state policies related to fathers. Florida and Massachusetts developed commissions designed to address fatherhood issues across the state. These commissions review programming and policies regarding fatherhood.

Clearly, developing and fostering collaborative relationships with relevant partners takes time. Given the scope and influence of child support agencies and the court systems to reach low-income fathers, developing mutual relationships with local providers can help these institutions realize their primary goal of helping children. At the same time, local providers gain access to a system that often is viewed as an adversary for their clients in a way that helps reconnect fathers and their children. In the end, children have the most to gain—increased access to the emotional and financial benefits of a providing father.

—By Dana Reichert, NCSL

Need help in designing a collaboration or state strategy? Contact the Nurturing Responsible Families Project at dana.reichert@ncsl.org, or phone (303) 894-3191.